Journal of Gender Studies2025, Vol. 34, No. 4, 526-539
https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2024.2431569

Open access

A systematic review of TERF behaviour online in relation to sociopsychological group dynamics

N. Ploch

General Psychology and Social Psychology, University Duisburg-Essen, Essen, Germany

Abstract

The increasing presence of Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminists (TERFs) in the media raises questions about their rhetoric and convictions, particularly on platforms like X (formerly Twitter), where contentious debates unfold. Given the limited existing research on TERFs, this study aims to deepen our understanding of the TERF movement's dynamics. Two document analyses were conducted to uncover insights into their online behaviour and its interplay with sociopsychological group dynamics. The first analysis scrutinized feminist journals and diverse X platform posts to delineate TERFs' categories and belief systems. The objective of this analysis was to provide a comprehensive overview of recent online discourse concerning gender criticism directed at trans individuals from a feminist perspective. In a second analysis, a literature review compared the identified categories, belief systems, and group dynamics with empirical findings, revealing alignment with recent literature. It was shown that TERFs exhibit typical group dynamics that can also be found in other conservative and authoritative ideologies. Nonetheless, further analyses are needed to fully grasp TERFs' group dynamics and elucidate their online

behaviours and belief structures.

Article History
Received 28 March 2024
Accepted 13 November 2024

Keywords
Terf, feminism, transgender, gender critical group dynamic

Contact N. Ploch nina.ploch@stud.uni-duesburg.de; nina.ploch@gmx.de
General Psychology and Social Psychology, University Duisburg-Essen, Universitätsstraße 2, Essen 45141, Germany

© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

Introduction

TERF ('Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminism') describes a distinct direction within feminism. Prominent figures, including Sheila Jeffreys, author of 'Gender Hurts'; Julie Bindel, author of 'Feminism for Women'; and J.K. Rowling, widely known for the Harry Potter series, have expressed views considered transphobic within feminist discourse. They argue, among other points, that the concept of transgender identity is a patriarchal construct aimed at encroaching on women's spaces and undermining feminist movements (e.g. Bindel, 2024; Golberg, 2014; Jeffreys, 2014; Morrow, 2024; Parsons, 2021). Existing literature on the TERF movement to date shows patterns and overlaps with other conservative and right-wing ideologies (e.g. Nava, 2022; Awcock & Rosenberg, 2023; Banerjea et al., 2019; Bassi & LaFleur, 2022; Billard, 2023; Bojanic et al., 2021; Burke, 2022; Gusmeroli, 2023; King, 2023; Pearce et al., 2020). These often focus on a specific

aspect, such as the effect of hateful speech against trans men and women, and/or primarily deal with other topics such as transphobic views in films or history. Studies on the topic are still rare, as the anti-trans movement from the feminist milieu has only become prominent in recent years. This study aims to provide an overview of recent online behaviour exhibited by TERFs.

To contrast behavioural patterns with sociopsychological group dynamics, two distinct qualitative document analyses are conducted. The first one identifies and decodes the behaviours and arguments employed by TERFs, using the coding methods of Toulmin (2003) and Walton (2005) and socio-psychological group dynamics. The second one compares these findings with existing literature to identify similarities and assess whether previous studies have reached similar conclusions. The overall aim is to decipher recent online behaviours of TERFs, to shed light on their underlying fears, such as the perceived loss of status as women, and to gain insight into the motivations behind their actions, particularly in the online environment.

To protect personal rights of X users, no direct quotes from the analysed postings are used; instead, the content is summarized and described.[1]

TERFs' positions on transgender

Although 'TERF' is a recognized term that describes the beliefs of most feminists who oppose gender self-identification and other measures to promote the rights of trans people, it is perceived as pejorative and is therefore increasingly used by opponents of the movement. Some TERFs prefer the label 'gender critical', a term that is often perceived as more neutral in public discourse, though there is ongoing debate about whether it downplays anti-trans prejudice (Turnbull-Dugarte & McMillan, 2023). In this study, both terms are used simultaneously without judgement.[2] It is important to differentiate between gender-critical feminism and gender-critical

perspectives outside of feminism. While both may use gender-critical rhetoric, our study specifically focuses on TERFs/gender-critical feminism.

Many self-defined gender-critical activists deny the existence of 'gender identity', recognizing only assigned sex as a form of gender (Schiappa, 2021; Schuh et al., 2020). They perceive the transgender rights movement as a potential threat to 'gender rights' and the erasure of biological sex as a social and political category (Carter, 2022). TERFs commonly hold the belief in binary genders (male and female) and reject the possibility of gender change (L. Jones, 2023; Tudor, 2021). They argue that gender carries political significance and advocate for preserving women's gender-specific rights (Carter, 2022; Righetti, 2021). Spaces and services specifically for women should be reserved for women and girls only, based on assigned sex rather than self-identified gender (Henderson, 2022; C. Jones & Slater, 2020). Lawford-Smith, an advocate of gender-critical feminism, describes in her book 'Sex Matters' (Lawford-Smith, 2023) that trans women are male and trans men are female, thus denying the equality of gender and gender identity (p. 173).

TERF rhetoric is often conveyed through personal narratives, particularly in essays, serving as an awareness-raising tool to shape the beliefs and attitudes of their audience (Fuerst, 2023). The creation of fixed categories defined by cis women implies boundaries that need to be policed, with negative consequences for those who do not clearly fit into the category (Camminga, 2020).

Social media and TERFs

Peña-Fernández et al. (2023) found that X (formerly Twitter) and TikTok are hubs of feminist activism, hosting diverse communities with varying views on gender identity. These communities demonstrate strong internal cohesion but limited dialogue with opposing viewpoints, resulting in polarized and confrontational debates. They argue that trans-inclusive approaches endanger the

well-being and self-discovery of LGB youth, reflecting a belief that trans identities conflict with or undermine those of LGB individuals (L. Jones, 2023, p. 5).

Discussions that were once held in academic settings are increasingly moving to social media platforms, prioritizing accessibility and wider reach (Zanghellini, 2020). Some argue that exclusion from mainstream discourse pushes TERFs to rely on social media, echoing narratives of radical feminists from the 1970s and portraying trans women as potential threats (Kubala, 2020). Banning social media accounts of gender-critical feminism speakers is seen as a deliberate 'trashing' of gender-critical statements and constructive criticism (Lawford-Smith, 2022, p. 13). Social media's role in the anti-gender movement remains significant, though its relationship with offline initiatives and its impact as a platform for digital activism strategies are still unclear (Righetti, 2021, p. 228).

TERF – just another group dynamic?

The inquiry arises as to whether TERF behaviour aligns with established group dynamics in other ideologies. The following theoretical constructs were selected before analysing postings and academic literature.

Need to belong

Baumeister and Leary (1995) describe the importance of group affiliation for human well-being. Individuals strive for positive, strong, and stable bonds, as these provide a sense of community, security, and support. TERFs likely strive for this feeling as well.

Social comparison theory

Festinger's (1954) theory suggests individuals assess their positions by comparing themselves with others, adopting group

norms, values, and behaviours (Schuh et al., 2020; Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Turner et al., 1987). This reliance on group membership may lead to illusory correlations and an out-group homogeneity effect, which TERFs might follow.

Ethnocentrism

Observed across various group contexts (Batson et al., 1993; Brewer, 1999; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999), ethnocentrism reveals why individuals join discriminatory or exclusionary groups. Reasons include type of interaction, shared goals, emotional closeness, and task-related activities (Nijstad & Van Kippenberg, 2014). Similar factors may contribute to TERF group membership.

Entitativity

Refers to the degree to which individuals perceive themselves as a cohesive unit (Campbell, 1958; Lickel et al., 2000). Individuals with less clarity about their identity are more likely to identify with entitative groups, which extremist groups often exploit (Hogg et al., 2007). This narrative of group distinctiveness may also apply to TERFs.

Intergroup relations

Developed by Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) based on Allport (1954), this concept suggests attitudes towards different social groups correlate with each other. TERFs' frequent communication with right-wing conservative groups promotes shared opinions, such as consistently perceiving trans women as men, reflecting a simplification of social perception.

Social dominance

This theory highlights the human tendency to establish

hierarchical social orders. Socially dominant individuals may exhibit manipulative behaviour to maintain power dynamics. For TERFs, this belief system perceives trans people as a threat to the social hierarchy, aligning with social conservatives to uphold gender hierarchies and preserve their power (Billard, 2023; Pratto et al., 2006; Spears & Tausch, 2014).

Assumptions

Regarding the socio-psychological group dynamics mentioned above, the following assumptions about TERFs and their group structures arise:

- TERFs seek solidarity with like-minded individuals, thus their fears hold significance within their peer group (need to belong)
- TERFs see themselves as more differentiated than trans people, who are all equally 'dangerous' (out-group homogeneity effect)
- TERFs are subject to an illusory correlation that trans people are dangerous, invade women's spaces or are paedophiles (illusory correlation)
- TERFs may be subject to a simplified view of the world, as the topic of trans is very complex (avoidance of stress, simplification of social perception)
- TERFs fear for their independence and their hard-won rights (social dominance)
- TERFs feel threatened in their own group values: they are afraid that their 'femininity' will be taken away from them and that they will no longer be seen as 'women' (group distinctiveness)

First study

An extensive X analysis was conducted to gain an overview. The short message service X was chosen for its wide range of discourse, opinions, and public accessibility, offering greater transparency compared to closed social media groups like Facebook or subreddits.

Additionally, magazines addressing transgender issues within feminism – specifically Emma, Preußische Allgemeine, Die Tagespost, Der Standard, as well as TMZ, Mail Online, and Spiked – were analysed, with particular attention to Emma, a prominent German feminist magazine known for its gender-critical stance.

In the X analysis, ethical principles were considered, focusing on data protection and user anonymity. Only publicly visible data from X was collected, including aliases without gender or age information. The country of origin was noted when possible, but no other demographic data was collected.

Procedure and methodology

A total of 55 user profiles and institutional pages publicly opposing trans people were analysed, alongside 32 texts and articles with corresponding comments. The search was conducted between 28 February and 4 November 2023. Most user profiles analysed were active during this period. The oldest profile started posting in 2008, the newest in 2022, with posts on trans topics often beginning in 2018, and most starting around 2020.

Coding

The collected posts were manually coded to identify patterns, themes, and arguments in the discourse. Arguments were analysed and categorized according to Toulmin's (2003) method, which breaks down arguments into six components:

- Claim: The main point or position being argued.
- Grounds: The evidence or reasons provided to support the claim.
- Warrant: The logical connection between the grounds and the claim. It explains why the grounds support the claim.
- Backing: Additional support for the warrant, often addressing underlying assumptions.
- Qualifier: A statement that indicates the strength of the claim,

often using words like ‘in most cases’ or ‘probably’.

Rebuttal: Counter-arguments or conditions under which the claim would not hold true.

The validity of the categories was checked using Walton’s (2005) principles of critical argumentation, which assess the coherence and adequacy of arguments by evaluating how well evidence supports claims and how arguments fit within broader reasoning contexts. Additionally, the arguments were evaluated within their dialogue.

The coding process for analysing comments and argumentation strategies using Toulmin and Walton’s frameworks was iterative. All 32 articles and 55 user profiles were selected for in-depth analysis within their respective discussions or reports, leading to a wide range of comments and arguments being analysed. Profiles were studied in their entirety using keywords and considered as a whole, as people often repeated themselves or argued in the same way. For example, one profile contained 64 posts with the term ‘trans women’ during the analysed period. However, not all of these posts were deemed relevant for in-depth analysis; many were brief, one-sentence responses that served to collect an overall message for categorization, rather than contributing significantly to the detailed examination of the arguments.

By combining Toulmin and Walton’s methods, the analysis captured both the structure of the arguments and the context in which they were presented. Toulmin’s model examined the argument’s structure, while Walton’s model focused on the critical reasoning aspects, identifying logical structures and potential fallacies within a broader context. This dual approach facilitated a robust qualitative analysis, highlighting consistent patterns in argumentation within the broader discourse framework.

The analysis also included quantitative aspects such as the frequency of certain terms or hashtags in posts. Most user profiles were from the USA (60%), followed by Germany (17%) and the UK (16%). Although the posts were in English, the country of origin

could not be determined for the remaining profiles.

User profiles were assessed according to recurring categories through an iterative process to ensure thorough categorization. Following the initial review, an advanced search using X further refined the categorization process, employing both English and German terms. For example, a search query might include 'biology (from:User)' to identify relevant postings for the category 'biology'.

Profiles were categorized using a binary system: a 0 if the category was not evident, and a 1 if it was. Table 1 lists the categories and corresponding search terms used in both languages. These search terms were employed in both German and English (depending on the language of the profile). Some search terms yielded insights across multiple categories, allowing them to be applied to more than one category (e.g. 'political' for all political orientations).

Table 1. Categories and keywords used on X. (Table view)

	Categories	Frequency	Percentage	Keywords
1	Were they trans themselves?	3	5.45	trans, transgender
2	Biology	49	89.09	biology, female, male, evidence
3	Child abuse	41	74.55	child abuse, pedo, predator, groom
4	Conservative (political)	23	41.82	conservative, right wing, maga, republican, afd
5	Left-liberal (political)	13	23.64	left, liberal, democrat, biden,
6	Other political orientation	19	34.55	political, voting, orientation

7	Belonging to feminism	41	74.55	feminism, feminist, women's rights
8	Belong to anti-feminism	6	10.91	anti-feminism, feminist
9	Anti-abortion/ pro-life	14	25.45	pro-life, abortion, women's rights, unborn, child
10	Christianity	15	27.27	belief, christianity, christ, jesus, god, religion
11	Other religions	7	12.73	belief, god, religion
12	Experienced rape/sexual abuse	4	7.27	abuse, sexual, rape, abuser, rapist
13	Against porn/ sexwork	34	61.82	sexwork, porn, onlyfans

Frequencies are given in absolute numbers and as a percentage. Keywords were used in both English and German. Only English is shown.

Of the 55 user profiles and institutional pages, most were openly conservative (41.82%). It was not possible to clearly identify the political orientation of almost a third of them, as they often mentioned to be part of a political centre or did not openly state their orientation (34.55%). The remaining profiles identified as left-wing or liberal (23.64%) but revealed conservative arguments in transphobic statements.

Most user profiles were in favour of a binary division of the sexes and referred to biology (89.09%). The remaining profiles did not explicitly mention a belief in binary gender. Of the 55 profiles, 41

(74.55%) believed trans people abuse children, try to convince them to be trans, or display grooming behaviour towards children, with some suggesting trans individuals were associated with paedophilia.

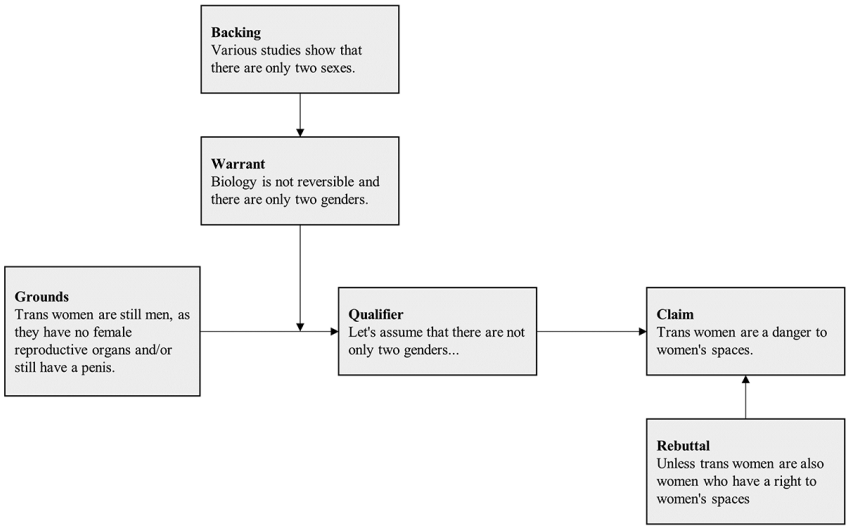
Although all profiles made negative comments about trans people, three users were trans themselves (5.45%). The remaining user profiles were cis people, detransitioners or of an unknown gender identity. Identifying the operators of institutional profiles proved challenging due to lack of clarity.

Four user profiles had experienced sexual abuse (7.27%) and spoke openly about it. Six user profiles identified as anti-feminist (10.91%) but were labelled as TERFs in some posts. Most of the user profiles analysed felt they belonged to feminism (74.55%). 34 profiles were against sex work and pornography (61.82%), and abortion (25.45%), aligning partly with Christian beliefs (27.27%). Seven user profiles identified with other religions (12.73%), including Judaism and Jehovah's Witnesses.

Results

The analysis of X posts and magazine articles revealed several belief systems. All posts and articles were analysed using Toulmin's rhetorical analysis framework to identify categories and schemes. Complex posts were decomposed into multiple arguments when necessary, and argumentation schemes were aggregated for comprehensive understanding. These categories and schemes were then examined using Walton's technique to verify their consistency as arguments.

For example, the claim 'Trans women are a danger to women's spaces' was used both literally and as part of broader argumentation schemes online. Figure 1 illustrates how Toulmin's model identified and analysed various argumentative components. **Figure 1**. Example of rhetorical analysis according to Toulmin.


Backing
Various studies show that there are only two sexes.
Warrant
Biology is not reversible and there are only two genders.
Grounds
Trans women are still men, as they have no female reproductive organs and/or still have a penis.
Qualifier
Let's assume that there are not only two genders...
Claim
Trans women are a danger to women's spaces.
Rebuttal
Unless trans women are also women who have a right to women's spaces

Walton's model required broadening narrow categories when reasoning contradicted initial claims. For instance, the argument that 'Trans women aren't real women because they can never have a uterus' contradicted the acceptance of cis women without a uterus as 'real' women. This led to the creation of broader categories, such as 'Trans women are not legitimate women', while maintaining the prevalent message that TERFs emphasized. Since this category did not fully capture the notion that trans women are perceived as a threat, two distinct categories were established. This approach led to the development of multiple categories, trying to ensure a comprehensive representation.

There are only two genders: Arguments centred on biology dictating a binary system and the belief that no child is born in the wrong body.

Trans women are not legitimate women: Profiles argued that trans women are men invading women's spaces, citing examples like prisons (for lenient punishments), toilets (sexual harassment) and sports (for competitive advantage).

Trans men are confused and influenced women: The belief that 'gender ideology' persuades confused women to become men, with patriarchy as a main argument.

- *Hormone replacement therapy is dangerous*: Opposition to hormone administration to children and adults, citing unverified studies and purported side effects.
- *Minors are forced/persuaded to undergo surgery*: Allegations of drugs prescribed to children without proper consideration, involving parental coercion and discussions of mutilation and castration.
- *Drag queens are actually paedophiles*: Accusations that drag queens, conflated with trans people, are paedophiles and should not interact with children.
- *Trans activism is misogynistic*: Belief that the ideology is misogynistic and sexist, citing intrusion into women's spaces and societal indoctrination.
- *Transgender (always) involves pornography*: Allegations of paedophilia and the belief that transgender identification is a fetish involving pornography.
- *Women are threatened in their existence*: Fear that trans rights efforts undermine traditional gender-based rights and protections for women.

In the next step, the beliefs of the user profiles are compared with scientific studies from recent years to identify similarities.

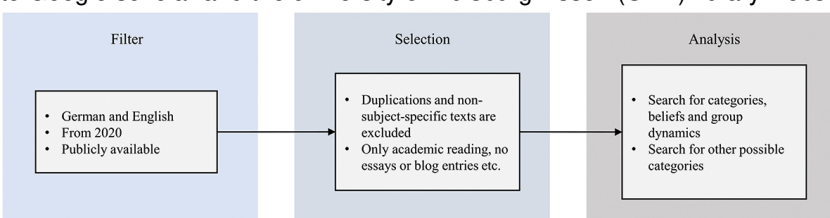
Second study

After gaining an initial picture of TERF behaviour on X, the next step was to verify these results using scientific publications and to compare assumptions from group dynamics with these findings. The focus was on two key questions:

- Can the identified categories and belief systems be found in scientific literature?
- Do the assumptions derived from group dynamics align with findings in the scientific literature?

Procedure and methodology

A systematic search was conducted using the terms 'Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminism' and 'Gender Critical Feminism'. The acronym 'TERF' was not used due to its different meanings in other contexts. The search was restricted to publications from 2020 onwards to ensure current information and included German and English articles, book chapters, and reviews. Publications that did not delve deeply into TERFs, feminism, gender politics, and social identity were excluded. The search began on 10 November 2023 and ended on 16 November 2023 and was conducted in three steps (Figure 2).**Figure 2**. Search process of academic literature and analysis of the second research. To access freely available publications, the search was limited to Google scholar and the university of Duisburg-Essen (UDE) library website.



Library page of the UDE

For the term 'Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminism', 16 results were returned without filters, and 12 were published since 2020. Applying the filters, only 5 publications were relevant. The term 'Gender Critical Feminism' returned 268 results without filters, 105 published since 2020, and 22 after filtering.

Google scholar

The search term 'Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminism' yielded 435 publications, 295 of which were published since 2020, and 41 after filtering. 'Gender Critical Feminism' yielded 4,660 publications, 2,110 published since 2020, and 43 after filtering. Most publications on gender critical feminism focused on different

topics.

Overall, 97 publications were analysed, including 60 journal articles (61.86%), 16 book chapters (16.49%), 13 master's theses (13.40%), five conference articles and presentations (5.15%), and three doctoral theses (3.09%).

Coding

Publications were listed and categorized. Relevant text excerpts were colour-coded and added to the list. Each publication could be assigned to multiple categories if mentioned explicitly. Categories were created iteratively, and topics addressed in three or more articles were included. Categories from the first study, such as 'TERFs speak out against sex work/pornography', were also adopted. The absolute numbers for each category are in Table 2.**Table 2**. Categories found in academic literature. (Table view)

	Categories	Frequency	Percentage
1	TERF is a hateful/negative ideology	37	38.14
2	Biology is unmistakable	64	65.98
3	Trans people invade women's spaces	51	52.58
4	TERF resembles authoritarianism/ social dominance	34	35.05
5	TERFs have conservative/ right-wing populist views	30	30.93
6	TERFs resemble or ally themselves with religious	8	8.25

	movements		
7	Trans people abuse others (esp. children/ young people)	16	16.49
8	TERFs speak out against sex work/ pornography	1*	1.03

Frequencies are given in absolute numbers and as a percentage. Articles could contain multiple categories. *This category was retained for comparison between studies 1 and 2, despite being mentioned in only one article.

Most of the articles reported on TERFs and their views and behaviour. Three articles approached the topic from a gender-critical perspective, detailing personal experiences. Two articles could not be categorized. Publications were often classified into three or more categories. An exploratory approach was used to create new categories if changes or differences were observed. However, no differences in argumentation were found between reports on TERFs and texts by TERFs. Tone of voice (e.g. aggression, neutrality) was not analysed, as it was outside this study's scope.

Afterwards, crucial text excerpts were compared with belief systems and group dynamics.

Results

Categories

Most categories identified in the X research were corroborated by scientific publications, except for 'anti-abortion/pro-life'. Although there were indications of gender-critical individuals associating with anti-abortion groups, no specific linkages were established.

Two additional categories were added: 'TERF is a hateful/ negative ideology' and 'Trans people invade women's spaces', as

these topics were frequently reported in academic literature.

Beliefs

Some beliefs aligned with observations in the literature, though not all were addressed in the analysed publications (Table 3).**Table 3.** Beliefs found in academic literature. (Table view)

	Belief	Frequency	Percentage
1	There are only two genders	64	65.98
2	Trans women are not legitimate women	16	16.49
3	Trans men are confused and influenced women	0	0
4	Hormone replacement therapy is dangerous	0	0
5	Minors are forced/ persuaded to have surgery	1	1.03
6	Drag queens are paedophiles	0	0
7	Trans activism is misogynistic	3	3.09
8	Transgender has to do with pornography	1	1.03
9	Women are threatened in their existence	20	20.62

Frequencies are given in absolute numbers and as a percentage. Articles could be assigned to multiple beliefs.

Group dynamics

All assumptions about group dynamics derived from theory were reflected in the analysed literature, focusing on gender demarcation and the discussion of womanhood. Absolute numbers and frequencies are detailed in Table 4.**Table 4**. Group dynamics found in academic literature. (Table view)

	Group dynamic	Frequency	Percentage
1	TERFs seek solidarity with like-minded individuals, thus their fears hold significance within their peer group (need to belong)	56	57.73
2	TERFs see themselves as more differentiated than trans people, who are all equally 'dangerous' (out-group homogeneity effect)	51	52.58
3	TERFs are subject to an illusory correlation that trans people are dangerous, invade women's spaces or are paedophiles (illusory correlation)	67	69.07

4	TERFs may be subject to a simplified view of the world, as the topic of trans is very complex (avoidance of stress, simplification of social perception)	64	65.98
5	TERFs fear for their independence and their hard-won rights (social dominance)	34	35.05
6	TERFs feel threatened in their own group values: they are afraid that their 'femininity' will be taken away from them and that they will no longer be seen as 'women' (group distinctiveness)	30	30.93

Frequencies are given in absolute numbers and as a percentage. Articles could be assigned to multiple group dynamics.

Conclusion

This paper aims to provide an overview of the viewpoints held by gender-critical individuals and TERFs, comparing them with

existing scientific literature. Numerous overlaps were identified, some attributable to shared methodologies and perspectives. Both studies showed that TERFs exhibit similar group dynamics to conservative and authoritarian groups, including a strong need for belonging, self-assessment based on beliefs, ethnocentrism, and social dominance dynamics.

Categories

Not all categories were substantiated in scientific publications; two additional categories were included. Topics like anti-abortion and pro-life received minimal academic attention. Similarly, discourse on sex work and pornography, extensively addressed in online TERF discussions, received little to no academic attention. The supplementary categories partially aligned with academic literature. The characterization of TERF as a hateful or negative ideology was absent from online findings, as TERF profiles do not explicitly portray themselves negatively. Academic literature focused on discussing TERFs and their behaviour, while X posts featured TERFs discussing transgender topics.

Discussions about intrusion into women's spaces, particularly involving trans women, were significant in both online and academic contexts. This category, initially excluded from the first study due to its perceived breadth, should have been included retrospectively.

Beliefs

Many articles agreed that TERFs believe there are only two genders, though not all explicitly mentioned this. Not all belief systems identified in the X discourse were corroborated by academic literature, possibly due to the stringent criteria requiring explicit mentions of specific topics. For instance, while some articles suggested scepticism towards hormone replacement therapy among

gender-critical individuals, there was insufficient evidence to label it as ‘dangerous’. Given the sensitivity of the topic, a strict interpretation of categories was deemed appropriate to avoid misinterpretation.

Future analyses could consider adopting more flexible criteria to validate or dismiss beliefs. Particularly for statements like ‘biology defines two genders’, an extended categorization system would be useful to clarify its centrality to the TERF movement. However, a more comprehensive system could also distort statements, as vague assumptions might be quickly interpreted as definitive declarations. For example, ‘Hormone replacement therapy is dangerous’ conveys a different message than ‘Hormone replacement therapy is not entirely safe’. Future research will require a revised categorization system, possibly supplemented by technical assistance.

Group dynamics

The document analysis substantiated the previously outlined group dynamics, revealing a discernible pattern within the TERF movement. Certain texts explicitly addressed issues of social dominance (Billard, 2023), while others characterized the TERF movement as authoritative (Okot-Bitek et al., 2022).

The findings validated the existence of conflicting interests between TERFs and transgender individuals, alongside phenomena such as out-group homogeneity and group distancing. TERFs often simplify their social perception by asserting notions like ‘real womanhood is exclusively determined on a natal, biological level’ (Carter, 2022; L. Jones, 2023; Parke, 2016; Tudor, 2021). Additionally, there exists an illusory correlation between transgender individuals and violence against women (e.g. Bojanic et al., 2021; Kubala, 2020; Tudor, 2021).

A common overlap between the analysed literature and the comments on X was the repeated concern about the alleged intrusion of men into women’s spaces.

The results of the second study indicate that TERFs exhibit typical group dynamics found in other contexts. Similar to conservative groups, TERFs show little openness to change, seek structure and order, and justify inequalities to cope with uncertainty and threat (cf. Jost et al., 2003). In addition to social dominance, TERFs also demonstrate features of authoritarianism (cf. Altemeyer, 1998). They tend to be ethnocentric, operate within narrow circles of like-minded individuals, and are convinced of their moral superiority.

Limitations

The document analysis was conducted without the use of additional qualitative data analysis software, which may have resulted in overlooked content and an unintentional emphasis on certain categories while leaving others undetected. Consequently, this study does not claim comprehensive coverage of all categories and beliefs discussed. Given the novelty of the topic and its limited representation in psychological research, there is a scarcity of relevant literature.

Achieving complete neutrality in the search process was challenging. Certain accounts, such as J.K. Rowling's, were analysed beforehand due to their known opinions, leading to a more deliberate selection process and precluding randomization. Additionally, the use of snowball sampling, where one account follows another, resulted in overlapping opinions. Despite these limitations, efforts were made to include accounts from diverse communities to ensure a broader perspective.

While Toulmin and Walton's frameworks offer valuable tools for argumentative writing, their application for identifying structures within existing arguments presents limitations, especially when dealing with emotionally charged discourse (Karbach, 1987; Walton, 2005). The rigidity of these coding systems can hinder accurate representation of complex, emotive discussions surrounding trans

issues. Future studies would benefit from employing a more adaptable coding tool that better accommodates the emotional and nuanced nature of such arguments.

Another limitation of this study is the inability to provide an exact number of comments or posts analysed, resulting in a vaguer account of the profiles reviewed. An exact count of postings or comments was not recorded, as this would have shifted the focus towards a quantitative analysis based solely on the volume of comments and postings reviewed. Instead, entire profiles were examined comprehensively, with arguments identified using specified key terms. This introduces the potential for subjective selection of arguments. The nature of the platform X, with its short messages and threaded discussions, may not be ideal for isolating and analysing individual arguments comprehensively. This focus on extracting arguments from short posts could skew the study towards a more quantitative analysis rather than the qualitative nature aimed for, affecting the argumentative strategies used for this analysis.

The search for scientific publications presented similar challenges. Search terms were deliberately selected to accommodate individuals commenting on trans issues regardless of their stance. However, it became apparent that the number of pro-trans publications outweighed anti-trans publications disproportionately. This discrepancy may stem from individuals holding anti-trans views refraining from using terms such as ‘gender critical’ and ‘TERF’ in their texts, thus eluding identification. Additionally, many texts from TERF perspectives may remain unpublished due to their often opinion-based nature lacking sufficient scientific backing (Zanghellini, 2020).

For a more comprehensive comparison, it might be beneficial to look only at publications written by authors with gender-critical views and categorize them in a separate system to gain further insight into different argumentation patterns. Given the significant discrepancy between the number of pro- and anti-trans texts, and

the fact that the iterative categorization process did not identify any specific argumentative features, except that TERFs do not describe themselves as a hateful ideology, further research should determine whether there is a difference between texts that report on gender-critical feminism and those that are part of the movement. Many academic publications identified also referenced online discourse among individuals with gender-critical views on social networks. Given the prevalent online activity among gender-critical individuals and the documentation of their arguments online, the inclusion of online material in these works may result in redundancy when compared with online contributions in this study.

For future research, exploring the offline activities of individuals with gender-critical views and contrasting them with their online behaviour could offer valuable insights. This approach could shed light on whether offline activities influence online behaviour or vice versa (see Ojeda, 2023).

The constantly evolving discussion about trans people on the internet seems like an inexhaustible topic. However, given its enormous scope, it is hardly possible to evaluate all aspects and arguments in their entirety. Nevertheless, there is a tendency that TERFs show typical group dynamics that can also be found in other conservative and authoritative ideologies. The question of why some feminists, who once fought from a marginalized group, now vigorously advocate for the suppression of trans individuals, particularly trans women, remains incompletely resolved despite this document analysis and its insights into multifactorial causes. Investigating this question in future studies through further analyses would be valuable.

Notes

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

N. Ploch is a psychologist, systemic counsellor, and research assistant at the Bavarian Academy for Addiction and Health Issues in Munich. She is currently pursuing her doctorate at the University of Duisburg-Essen, focusing on societal perspectives on transgender issues, particularly the influence of media, feminism, and discrimination.

References

Allport, G. W. (1954). *The nature of prejudice*. Addison-Wesley.

Altemeyer, B. (1998). The other "authoritarian personality. In M. P. Zanna (Ed.), *Advances in experimental social psychology* (Vol. 30, pp. 47–92). Academic Press. Crossref.

Awcock, H., & Rosenberg, R. (2023). Palimpsests of trans rights: Trans-positive stickers and the contestations of transphobia in public space. *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 28(3), 1–18. Crossref. Web of Science.

Banerjea, N., Browne, K., Ferreira, E., Olasik, M., & Podmore, J. (2019). *Lesbian feminism: Essays opposing global heteropatriarchies*. Bloomsbury Publishing. Crossref.

Bassi, S., & LaFleur, G. (2022). Introduction: TERFs, gender-critical movements, and postfascist feminisms. *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, 9(3), 311–333. Crossref. Web of Science.

Batson, C. D., Schoenrade, P., & Ventis, W. L. (1993). *Religion and the individual: A social-psychological perspective*. Oxford University Press.

Baumeister, R. F., & Leary, M. R. (1995). The need to belong: Desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation. *Psychological Bulletin*, 117(3), 497–529. Crossref. PubMed. Web of Science.

Billard, T. J. (2023). "Gender-critical" discourse as disinformation: Unpacking TERF strategies of political communication. *Women's Studies in Communication*, 46(2), 235–243. Crossref. Web of Science.

Bindel, J. (2024, April 1). *Twenty years a terf*. UnHerd. https://unherd.com/2024/04/twenty-years-a-terf/

Bojanic, S., Abadía, M. C., & Moro, V. (2021). Feminist responses to populist politics. *European Journal of English Studies*, 25(2), 113–132. Crossref. Web of Science.

Brewer, M. B. (1999). The psychology of prejudice: Ingroup love and

outgroup hate? *The Journal of Social Issues*, 55(3), 429–444. Crossref. Web of Science.
Burke, M. (2022). Trans women participation in sport: A commentary on the conservatism of gender critical feminism. *International Journal of Sport Policy & Politics*, 14(4), 689–696. Crossref. Web of Science.
Camminga, B. (2020). Disregard and danger: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and the voices of trans (and cis) African feminists. *Sociological Review*, 68(4), 817–833. Crossref. Web of Science.
Campbell, D. T. (1958). Common fate, similarity, and other indices of the status of aggregates of persons as social entities. *Behavioral Science*, 3(1), 14. Crossref. Web of Science.
Carter, M. (2022). Trans women are (or are becoming) female: Disputing the endogeneity constraint. *Hypatia*, 37(2), 384–401. Crossref. Web of Science.
Festinger, L. (1954). A theory of social comparison processes. *Human Relations*, 7(2), 117–140. Crossref. Web of Science.
Fuerst, D. (2023). Making the political personal: Consciousness raising for the contemporary trans exclusionary radical feminist. *Honors College Theses*, 191. https://digitalcommons.murraystate.edu/honorstheses/191/
Golberg, M. (2014, July 28). What is a woman? *The New Yorker*. https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/08/04/woman-2
Gusmeroli, P. (2023). Is gender-critical feminism feeding the neo-conservative anti-gender rhetoric? Snapshots from the Italian public debate. *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 28(3), 1–18. Crossref. Web of Science.
Henderson, E. F. (2022). 'So, it's not necessarily about exclusion': Category use in naturally occurring transphobic talk. *Journal of Language & Discrimination*, 6(2). Crossref.
Hogg, M. A., Sherman, D. K., Dierselhuis, J., Maitner, A. T., & Moffitt, G. (2007). Uncertainty, entitativity, and group identification. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 43(1), 135–142. Crossref. Web of Science.
Jeffreys, S. (2014). *Gender hurts: A feminist analysis of the politics of transgenderism*. Routledge. Crossref.
Jones, C., & Slater, J. (2020). The toilet debate: Stalling trans possibilities and defending 'women's protected spaces'. *Sociological Review*, 68(4), 834–851. Crossref. Web of Science.
Jones, L. (2023). Language, gender and sexuality in 2022: Documenting and resisting regressive ideology. *Gender & Language*, 17(2), 1–18. Crossref. Web of Science.
Jost, J. T., Glaser, J., Kruglanski, A. W., & Sulloway, F. J. (2003). Political conservatism as motivated social cognition. *Psychological Bulletin*, 129(3), 339–375. Crossref. PubMed. Web of Science.

Karbach, J. (1987). Using Toulmin's model of argumentation. *Journal of Teaching Writing*, 6(1), 81–92.
King, A. (2023). Trans-versing gender boundaries: An examination of flintridge sacred heart's women's and gender studies curriculum. *Journal of Student Academic Research*, 4(1). https://jsar.fsha.org/index.php/jsar/article/view/61
Kubala, J. (2020). Teaching "bad feminism": Mary Daly and the legacy of'70s lesbian-feminism. *Feminist Formations*, 32(1), 117–136. Crossref.
Lawford-Smith, H. (2022). Trashing and tribalism in the gender wars. In N. Birondo (Ed.), *The moral psychology of hate* (pp. 207–233). Rowman & Littlefield. Crossref.
Lawford-Smith, H. (Ed.). (2023). Is gender-critical speech hate speech? In *Sex Matters: Essays in Gender-Critical Philosophy* (pp. 172–193). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Lickel, B., Hamilton, D. L., Wieczorkowska, G., Lewis, A., Sherman, S. J., & Uhles, A. N. (2000). Varieties of groups and the perception of group entitativity. *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology*, 78(2), 223–246. Crossref. PubMed. Web of Science.
Morrow, B. (2024, September 17). *JK Rowling's transphobia controversy: A complete timeline*. *The Week*. https://theweek.com/feature/1020838/jk-rowlings-transphobia-controversy-a-complete-timeline
Nava, M. (2022). *Trans and the normalisation of difference*. Chartist. https://www.chartist.org.uk/trans-and-the-normalisation-of-difference/
Nijstad, B. A., & Van Kippenberg, D. (2014). Gruppendynamik. In K. Jonas, W. Stroebe, & M. Hewstone (Eds.), *Sozialpsychologie* (pp. 439–467). Springer. Crossref.
Ojeda, T. (2023). *Anti-gender politics in Latin America in pandemic times*. https://sxpolitics.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Comment-SPW-e-book-Antigender-in-Latam-Tomas-Ojeda.docx.pdf
Okot-Bitek, J., Fevrier, K., Shah, V., Shon, S., Reder, D., & Gill-Peterson, J. (2022). Critical race theory today: A roundtable conversation. *Journal of Critical Race Inquiry*, 9(2), 116–138.
Parke, C. (2016, August 11). *The christian right's love affair with Anti-trans feminists*. Political Research Associates. https://politicalresearch.org/2016/08/11/the-christian-rights-love-affair-with-anti-trans-feminists
Parsons, V. (2021, January 27). *MPs urged by Anti-trans 'Women's rights' group to eliminate 'transgenderism' and scrap gender recognition act*. *PinkNews*. https://www.thepinknews.com/2021/01/27/womens-human-rights-campaign-gender-recognition-act-inquiry-trans-transphobia/
Pearce, R., Erikainen, S., & Vincent, B. (2020). Afterword: TERF wars in

the time of COVID-19. *Sociological Review*, 68(4), 882–888. Crossref. Web of Science.
Peña-Fernández, S., Larrondo-Ureta, A., & Morales-I-Gras, J. (2023). Feminism, gender identity and polarization in TikTok and twitter. *Comunicar*, 31(75), 49–60. Crossref. Web of Science.
Pettigrew, T. F., & Tropp, L. R. (2006). A meta-analytic test of intergroup contact theory. *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology*, 90(5), 751–783. Crossref. PubMed. Web of Science.
Pratto, F., Sidanius, J., & Levin, S. (2006). Social dominance theory and the dynamics of intergroup relations: Taking stock and looking forward. *European Review of Social Psychology*, 17(1), 271–320. Crossref. Web of Science.
Righetti, N. (2021). The Anti-gender debate on social media. A computational communication science analysis of networks, activism, and misinformation. *Comunicazione politica*, 2(22), 223–250. Crossref.
Schiappa, E. (2021). *The Transgender Exigency: Defining Sex and Gender in the 21st Century* (1st ed.). Routledge. Crossref.
Schuh, S. C., van Dick, R., Wegge, J., & Haslam, S. A. (2020). Soziale Identität und Stress. In T. Ringeisen, P. Genkova, & F. Leong (Eds.), *Handbuch Stress und Kultur: Interkulturelle und kulturvergleichende Perspektiven* (pp. S. 1–16). Springer. Crossref.
Sidanius, J., & Pratto, F. (1999). *Social dominance: An intergroup theory of social hierarchy and oppression*. Cambridge University Press. Crossref.
Spears, R., & Tausch, N. (2014). Vorurteile und Intergruppenbeziehungen. In K. Jonas, W. Stroebe, & M. Hewstone (Eds.), *Sozialpsychologie* (pp. S. 470–505). Springer. Crossref.
Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1986). The social identity theory of intergroup behavior. In S. Worchel & W. G. Austin (Eds.), *Psychology of intergroup relations* (2nd ed. pp. 7–24). Burnham Inc Pub.
Toulmin, S. E. (2003). *The uses of argument*. Cambridge university press. Crossref.
Tudor, A. (2021). Decolonizing trans/gender studies? Teaching gender, race, and sexuality in times of the rise of the global right. *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, 8(2), 238–256. Crossref. Web of Science.
Turnbull-Dugarte, S. J., & McMillan, F. (2023). "Protect the women!" Trans-exclusionary feminist issue framing and support for transgender rights. *Policy Studies Journal*, 51(3), 629–666. Crossref. Web of Science.
Turner, J. C., Hogg, M. A., Oakes, P. J., Reicher, S. D., & Wetherell, M. S. (1987). *Rediscovering the social group: A self-categorization theory*. Basil Blackwell. Crossref.
Walton, D. (2005). *Fundamentals of critical argumentation*. Cambridge

University Press. Crossref.
Zanghellini, A. (2020). Philosophical problems with the gender-critical feminist argument against trans inclusion. *SAGE Open*, 10(2), 2158244020927029. Crossref. Web of Science.

Sections

1. Abstract
2. Introduction
3. TERFs' positions on transgender
4. Social media and TERFs
5. TERF – just another group dynamic?
    1. Need to belong
    2. Social comparison theory
    3. Ethnocentrism
    4. Entitativity
    5. Intergroup relations
    6. Social dominance
    7. Assumptions
6. First study
7. Procedure and methodology
    1. Coding
    2. Results
8. Second study
    1. Procedure and methodology
    2. Coding
    3. Results
9. Conclusion
    1. Categories
    2. Beliefs
    3. Group dynamics

4. Limitations

10. Notes
11. Disclosure statement
12. Notes on contributor
13. References

Guide

1. List of Sections
2. List of Illustrations
3. Frontmatter
4. Abstract
5. Keywords
6. Bodymatter
7. Backmatter
8. Notes
9. References

List of Illustrations

1. Figure 1
2. Figure 2

Figure 1. Example of rhetorical analysis according to Toulmin.

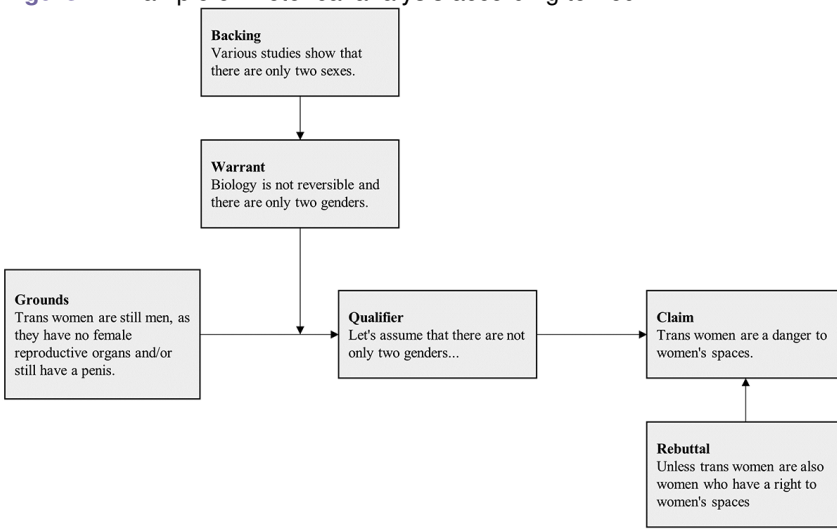

Backing
Various studies show that there are only two sexes.
Warrant
Biology is not reversible and there are only two genders.
Grounds
Trans women are still men, as they have no female reproductive organs and/or still have a penis.
Qualifier
Let's assume that there are not only two genders...
Claim
Trans women are a danger to women's spaces.
Rebuttal
Unless trans women are also women who have a right to women's spaces

Figure 2. Search process of academic literature and analysis of the second research. To access freely available publications, the search was limited to Google scholar and the university of Duisburg-Essen (UDE) library website.

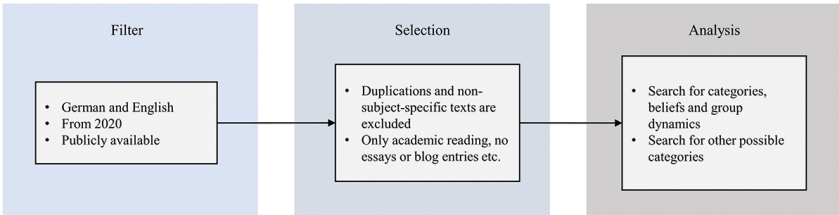


Table 1. Categories and keywords used on X.

	Categories	Frequency	Percentage	Keywords
1	Were they trans themselves?	3	5.45	trans, transgender
2	Biology	49	89.09	biology, female, male, evidence
3	Child abuse	41	74.55	child abuse, pedo, predator, groom
4	Conservative (political)	23	41.82	conservative, right wing, maga, republican, afd
5	Left-liberal (political)	13	23.64	left, liberal, democrat, biden,
6	Other political orientation	19	34.55	political, voting, orientation
7	Belonging to feminism	41	74.55	feminism, feminist, women's rights
8	Belong to anti-feminism	6	10.91	anti-feminism, feminist
9	Anti-abortion/ pro-life	14	25.45	pro-life, abortion, women's rights, unborn, child
10	Christianity	15	27.27	belief, christianity, christ, jesus, god, religion
11	Other	7	12.73	belief, god,

	religions			religion
12	Experienced rape/sexual abuse	4	7.27	abuse, sexual, rape, abuser, rapist
13	Against porn/ sexwork	34	61.82	sexwork, porn, onlyfans

Frequencies are given in absolute numbers and as a percentage. Keywords were used in both English and German. Only English is shown.

Table 2. Categories found in academic literature.

	Categories	Frequency	Percentage
1	TERF is a hateful/negative ideology	37	38.14
2	Biology is unmistakable	64	65.98
3	Trans people invade women's spaces	51	52.58
4	TERF resembles authoritarianism/ social dominance	34	35.05
5	TERFs have conservative/ right-wing populist views	30	30.93
6	TERFs resemble or ally themselves with religious movements	8	8.25
7	Trans people abuse others (esp. children/ young people)	16	16.49
8	TERFs speak out against sex work/ pornography	1*	1.03

Frequencies are given in absolute numbers and as a percentage. Articles could contain multiple categories. *This category was retained for comparison between studies 1 and 2, despite being mentioned in only one article.

Table 3. Beliefs found in academic literature.

	Belief	Frequency	Percentage
1	There are only two genders	64	65.98
2	Trans women are not legitimate women	16	16.49
3	Trans men are confused and influenced women	0	0
4	Hormone replacement therapy is dangerous	0	0
5	Minors are forced/ persuaded to have surgery	1	1.03
6	Drag queens are paedophiles	0	0
7	Trans activism is misogynistic	3	3.09
8	Transgender has to do with pornography	1	1.03
9	Women are threatened in their existence	20	20.62

Frequencies are given in absolute numbers and as a percentage. Articles could be assigned to multiple beliefs.

Table 4. Group dynamics found in academic literature.

	Group dynamic	Frequency	Percentage
1	TERFs seek solidarity with like-minded individuals, thus their fears hold significance within their peer group (need to belong)	56	57.73
2	TERFs see themselves as more differentiated than trans people, who are all equally 'dangerous' (out-group homogeneity effect)	51	52.58
3	TERFs are subject to an illusory correlation that trans people are dangerous, invade women's spaces or are paedophiles (illusory correlation)	67	69.07
4	TERFs may be subject to a simplified view of the world, as the topic of trans is very complex (avoidance of	64	65.98

	stress, simplification of social perception)		
5	TERFs fear for their independence and their hard-won rights (social dominance)	34	35.05
6	TERFs feel threatened in their own group values: they are afraid that their ‘femininity’ will be taken away from them and that they will no longer be seen as ‘women’ (group distinctiveness)	30	30.93